

(Re) Shaping and Expanding LIS Education in the Caribbean: An Examination of Strategic and Transformative Responses of the DLIS, University of the West Indies, Mona

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ABSTRACT

Significant changes in LIS education in the last 2 decades have resulted from varied impacts and drivers. Bronstein speaks to an “information paradigm shift” towards more user-centered approaches in information delivery, a resulting transformation of the roles of information professionals and the nature of their work and their competencies (2007; 2009; 2015).

This paper details the recent experience of the Department of Library and Information Studies, (DLIS) at The University of the West Indies, (UWI) Mona, while responding to demands for a new and expanded LIS curriculum, repositioned itself as a “best- practice” model for pedagogy and program change within a Faculty of Humanities and Education. The paper examines the vision, mandates and drivers as well as strategic, and in some instances radical, and contentious responses of the DLIS to changing institutional, societal, and global expectations and needs. Processes, strategies and challenges involved in identifying broad and specific career needs for information professionals within the Caribbean are discussed.

Indicators of success are also addressed in relation to the drivers and mandates and include a new graduate program in Archives and Records Management, a cross-disciplinary undergraduate program in Information Studies, increased student intake from a wider cross-section of the Caribbean via online and blended offerings, and spinoffs such as development of SMART classrooms to facilitate online teaching and learning, increased uptake for professional development programs, and a repositioned DLIS within The UWI, Mona.

TOPICS

education programs/schools; online learning; pedagogy; continuing education; curriculum; standards

INTRODUCTION – EXPANSION AND CHANGE IN LIS EDUCATION

There is no dearth of literature on programmatic and curricula changes in LIS education which have taken place across regions, and in new and specific domains of the information profession, as well as the drivers behind these changes and how these changes reflect the expanded LIS reach. Three broad categories of change impacting the roles of information professionals, namely technological, demographic, and globalization, are discussed by Abels, Howarth and Smith (2016). The authors note that responding and adapting to these changes “will determine the success or failure of LIS education” (p84). These and other change drivers resulting in what Cherinet calls a “paradigm shifts in LIS professions” (2017, p.93), have impacted small national jurisdictions seeking to transform existing LIS programs. Rehman (2010), Mammo (2011), and Edegbo (2011) have examined redesigns of LIS programs in Kuwait, Ethiopia and Nigeria respectively, while Rajkoomar (2013) and Mbagwu, Okoye, & Anyanwu (2018) reported on changes in pedagogy towards online delivery in South Africa, and Nigeria. (Bronstein (2015) examined LIS courses in Israel, and noted that professionals were developed to work in advanced technological environments, but lacked competencies for personal growth and development. Other researchers have addressed how LIS programs have responded to institutional changes and market forces, which have resulted in the creation of non-traditional curricula such as archival studies, and digital curation (Fulton, et al., 2011). Evidence of the role and benefits of inter and cross disciplinary collaboration in the expansion of LIS education and shaping of information professionals has also been documented.

BACKGROUND: UNIQUE LIS EDUCATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

LIS education in the Caribbean, has evolved, with sustained efforts aimed at transforming programs to ensure relevance, since 1972, with the creation of the Department of Library and Information Studies (DLIS) at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, Jamaica. Established with a mandate to develop information professionals throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, the DLIS is unique in its offerings as a regional, and yet global institution, as it has been shaped by an education system rooted in British practice, while continuously being impacted by US standards and practice over the last 30 years (Carroll, Kerr, Musa & Afzal, 2013). Responses of the DLIS over its brief history to national (including market driven), and regional demands, as well as the seeming contending cultural jurisdictions, and the resulting programmatic changes, have been documented by Heads of Departments including, Douglas (1992), Bennet and Ferguson (2000), Mohamedali (2004), Kerr (2012), and Stewart (2012). Significant changes include a name change, a graduate program developed primarily to satisfy the career needs of graduates of the longstanding undergraduate program, and the continuous addition of industry relevant courses. The overall aim has been to create and recreate LIS education towards realizing the mission of “equipping information professionals in the Caribbean to meet the challenges of the dynamic information environment” (DLIS, 2012).

CURRICULUM EXPANSION AND CHANGE AT THE DLIS

Major curricula and programmatic changes have also been realized in the last five years in undergraduate, graduate and continuing education offerings by the DLIS, not only to meet the needs of the 21st century Caribbean information professional, and a changing global information environment, but in response to local, institutional and societal expectations and demands. Mandates from key stakeholders at The UWI, Mona, focused on “redesign of curricula aimed at reaching new and different constituents” (Kerr, 2012). There were also national and regional mandates from industry partners for flexible and varied pedagogy for greater reach, as well as relevant programs and courses to meet the needs of major and potential employers of graduates including Archives and Special Collections.

Primary objectives therefore for reshaping the DLIS curriculum since 2014 were to equip students with a range of new and emerging, as well as foundational competencies and attitudes, including theoretical and practical knowledge, and highly specialized skill-sets. The need for a graduate program in Archives and Records Management came to the fore since no comparable program exists in the Caribbean, and the DLIS felt it necessary to provide a dedicated ‘space’ for the academic analysis of the unique Caribbean memory and recordkeeping practices, which emerge from the realities of the Caribbean experience, and which were not addressed in other international programs. A Caribbean-wide Needs Assessment confirmed the urgency of this change.

A collaborative, consultative approach was therefore employed with key stakeholders including UWI faculty, DLIS students and graduates, and national and regional employers of graduates as well as international faculty and practitioners. An iterative planning process included an intense curriculum review, identification of gaps, determination of new program offerings, and defining successful outcome indicators. For example, restructuring of, and in some instances termination of specific courses within existing programs were initiated based on feedback from employers of graduates as well as benchmarking against global standards including the ALA Core Competencies of Librarianship (2009) and the CAEP Standards (2019). Development of the new graduate program in Archives and Records Management was done within the framework of deep collaboration with the staff of The UWI Archives, who assisted with developing a funding proposal, identified key expert practitioners and faculty, for creating program content to ensure authenticity, and led in initial coordinating of the program in 2016. Significant changes in pedagogy towards online delivery of new and existing programs have transformed the face of the DLIS from near death experience with reduced student intake, to becoming a model for change and academic sustainability.

Major successes and outcomes are discussed in relation to vision and mandates. These include exciting directions in the DLIS curriculum, namely a cross-disciplinary undergraduate program in Information Studies, graduate program in Archives and Records Management, and new and reshaped courses in significant areas. Of note also, resulting from the mandate from the UWI and regional employers, is the significant increase in student intake in all programs via online, the installation of SMART classrooms to accommodate online students and increased number of participants for professional development in the Annual Summer Institute. Renewed

enthusiasm and dedication from faculty and staff is evident as they continue to shape and expand programs to ensure sustainability and relevance

Unsworth (2010) contends that multiple challenges face educators in the pursuit of innovation and change. The DLIS is no different and while successes are recorded, challenges remain including issues associated with “independence” of the Department, the quest for international accreditation, recruitment of faculty, and the ability to satisfy competing demands for change.

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